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EDWIN B. FIRMAGE, ed. *An Abundant Life: The Memoirs of Hugh B. Brown*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1988. xiii; 152 pp. \$9.95 paperback.

Reviewed by Richard D. Poll, professor emeritus of history, Western Illinois University.

Reading *The Memoirs of Hugh B. Brown* was like visiting with an old and admired friend. President Brown was a faculty colleague when I came to Brigham Young University in 1948. He was an adviser and strategically situated helper in the 1960s, when several campus developments engaged the attention of members of the board of trustees. And he was an amiable commentator as Eugene Campbell and I put together the biography that reached the bookstores ten days after his death in 1975.¹

Several factors fully justify the publication of this memoir, even though it contains little new biographical information. First, it reintroduces to the Church a man who is unknown, except for occasional quotations in authorized lesson manuals, to a majority of today's Latter-day Saints. Second, it presents in context most of the famous Hugh B. Brown stories, some of which still circulate in audiotape format. Third, it offers some of the sage advice that made President Brown a special resource for two generations of young people who faced the challenges of understanding and applying the gospel in a changing world. Fourth, it looks at the institutional Church in terms that are a useful corrective to dogmas of prophetic infallibility and scriptural inerrancy. Fifth, it reminds those who knew him, personally or as a powerful pulpit figure, of why Hugh Brown found a unique place in the hearts of so many people.

The memoir is a slightly expanded and lightly edited transcript of a series of taped interviews that University of Utah law professor Edwin Firmage had with his maternal grandfather in 1969–70. Several letters and a selection of family pictures have been added. Noting in the book's introduction that "Grandfather told the truth—as he remembered and believed it" (xii), Firmage does not correct the occasional small errors of fact² or grapple with the evidence that some of the great faith-promoting stories, such as the currant bush, recount historical events that may never have occurred as described.³ Instead, he lets the autobiographical reminiscence speak for itself, and it tells the story of a unique, engaging, and important man.

The narrative begins in Salt Lake City in 1883, when a second son and fifth child was born to a stern, even harsh, father and an affectionate mother—both Browns. Hence Hugh Brown Brown,

who came to be the repository of the high hopes of his mother and several prominent Mormons with whom he had contact as a child and young man. His family moved to Alberta, Canada, in 1899. There he learned ranching and received a basic education before going on a mission to England (1904–6) and marrying Zina Card, of Logan. Their sixty-six year union gave him eight children and a firm testimony of the potential for happiness in a good marriage. While Zina was totally incapacitated by a series of strokes that left her bedridden and speechless for seven years, he dictated these words:

I hope that my wife and I can both live until the last one of us dies, so that when we go, we will go hand in hand. For I am afraid that this is the only way I will be able to get through the pearly gates, to hang on her hand and slip through on her record. Then when our children come up there, their mother will have a big harp and I, with chin whiskers, will have a banjo and we will play and march as they come, "littlest by littlest," as we used to say on Christmas mornings. (134)

After military service as a training officer in World War I, Hugh qualified to practice law in Canada, then relocated with his family in Salt Lake City in 1927. Already having served as a stake president in Alberta, he soon was called to head the Granite Stake; that calling brought collaboration with Harold B. Lee, Henry D. Moyle, and other pioneers of the Church welfare program. His enduring connection with the Democratic party led to an unsuccessful campaign for a senatorial nomination in 1934 and a brief, unhappy service on the Utah Liquor Control Commission. When he moved to California in 1937, at fifty-three years of age, he felt his fortunes to be at a low ebb.

The remaining forty-two years were devoted almost entirely to Church-oriented work. He served successively, and successfully, as president of the British Mission, LDS servicemen's coordinator, British Mission president again, and very popular teacher of religion at BYU. An unrewarding quest for wealth in the Canadian oil business, 1950–54, was followed by calls to be an Assistant to the Quorum of the Twelve, then one of the Twelve, then a Counselor *to*, Second Counselor *in*, and from 1963 to 1970 First Counselor in the First Presidency. When Joseph Fielding Smith reconstituted the First Presidency on the death of David O. McKay, Hugh B. Brown resumed his calling among the Apostles.

The memoir is salt-and-peppered with the wit and wisdom of its author. Of the former, some was purely for fun's sake. In a courting letter to Zina, he observed that "it is possible for a Brown to feel blue" (34). As death approached, he more than once used the phrase "Son of Obituary" (146); to his biographers he suggested

that it might be an appropriate title for their book. But more often he used the light touch to make a profound point, as when he credited these words to an elderly and forgiving bishop with whom he served as a young and by-the-book counselor: “Brethren, there is one thing for which I am profoundly grateful, and that is that God is an old man. I would hate to be judged by you young fellows” (19).

Few specific details about President Brown’s activities as a General Authority are provided in the memoir. His overall appraisal: “Although I have had some rather difficult experiences . . . by reason of some misunderstandings and disagreements, it has been a truly wonderful experience” (115). In his editorial afterword, Firmage describes the controversies over racial policies during the 1960s and concludes: “I believe without the slightest doubt that his [Brown’s] position on blacks and the priesthood was the matter that led to his removal from the new First Presidency” (142–43).

On the basis of his assignment, while Assistant to the Twelve, to review applications for temple divorces, Elder Brown was moved to write and speak extensively on the problems and possibilities of marriage. He believed that most Mormon families would benefit from “better programs of sexual education” (118). Of prescriptive approaches to marital behavior, he wrote:

It is a dangerous thing to try to regulate the private lives of husbands and wives or for church leaders to go into the bedroom of a couple who are married and try to dictate what they should or should not do. Many of the problems people bring to the authorities of the church should be settled by the persons themselves. They know the basic rule of right and wrong. For example, there are cases where abortion is absolutely justified, in fact necessary, such as in the case of forcible rape, the threat of permanent injury to the mother’s health or life, or the possibility of a grossly deformed birth. . . . And while we have not taken the unyielding attitude of some other churches toward artificial birth control, we cannot officially endorse it because too many young people would stop having children. Even so, I think we will one day have to modify our position. (119–20)

The last two chapters, “A General Authority” and “A Final Testimony,” should be read by a wider audience than is likely to see them. They reflect the experiences of a man who was often a minority voice in counsel even when he held great power in administration. Observations on the nature of the General Authority calling (123–26) are important in a time when doctrines of infallibility are attractive to many Saints. Advocacy of a thoughtful approach to testimony was a hallmark of President Brown’s sermons, and quotable aphorisms abound. For example:

The church is not so much concerned with whether the thoughts of its members are orthodox or heterodox as it is that they shall have thoughts. (139)

Revealed insights should leave us stricken with the knowledge of how little we really know. It should never lead to an emotional arrogance based upon a false assumption that we somehow have all the answers—that we in fact have a corner on truth. For we do not. (140)

Both creative science and revealed religion find their fullest and truest expression in the climate of freedom. (137)

All my life I have advocated that people in and out of the church should think through every proposition presented to them. Positions may be modified as time passes by discussing them with others, but there should be no question that both liberals and conservatives in the church are free to express their opinions. (131)

In my own life I have questioned all the things that men and women question and I have had my own struggle with some problems. But I have found it desirable to lay aside some things that I do not fully understand and await the time when I will grow up enough to see them more clearly. There is so much that is good and true that I can and do approve and accept with all my heart that I can afford to wait for further light on some of these disturbing questions. (133)

Hugh B. Brown was an imposing, intelligent, articulate, and—in spite of surgery for tic douloureux that left his face partially paralyzed—handsome man. Among the General Authorities of his day, his charisma was matched only by President David O. McKay. There is some evidence that, like President McKay, he was not impervious to the danger against which he cautioned: “But the man who is to be successful as a church leader must learn . . . that the adulation of people can be detrimental if it gives him a wrong estimate of his own importance” (123). Still, his life and teachings commend themselves to today’s Latter-day Saints, and this memoir offers an economical way to encounter them.

NOTES

¹Eugene E. Campbell and Richard D. Poll, *Hugh B. Brown: His Life and Thought* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1975).

²For example, “within 120 miles of Cambridge” (21–22), “Pacific” (90), and “Supreme Court” (95).

³See Campbell and Poll, *Hugh B. Brown*, 67–71, 217–19. An energetic, dedicated, and persuasive young stake presidency might lead every member of the Lethbridge stake to make a tithing contribution in 1922, but the recollection that at year’s end there “was not a man, woman or child in the stake who had a dollar who had not tithed it” is almost certainly inaccurate (70).